

A HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN THE YAKIMA VALLEY
WASHINGTON FROM 1880 TO 1900

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

1910

PREFACE

The agricultural industry has such a diverse character that any writer who chooses it for a subject is confronted with the problem of making a selection of materials which will enable him to present a well balanced idea of the industry as a whole. Any one of its various subdivisions could well be chosen as the subject for a discussion of this length; but it is the opinion of the writer that such a study would not be of as much value as a general study which attempts to show the development of all of the major enterprises which combine to form the agriculture of any given region.

To write upon the subject in this broader sense is not at all easy to do. It is especially difficult to give to each topic which is discussed the proper emphasis in proportion to its relative importance to the industry as a whole. Certain activities will appear to a community to be of paramount importance, and as long as they remain in that position they are naturally the principal subject of discussion. Anything that is unusual will receive several columns of space in the local newspaper although it may be nothing more than a transient experiment. Such things have their importance in the development of any great industry, but the attention which is given to them often overshadows the more permanent but less spectacular features. To apply these generalizations to the specific problem at hand, one can find an abundance of materials which relates to such subjects as irrigation, the problems of transportation and markets, experimental developments with crops, and the problems connected with the livestock industry; but information about such subjects as the gradual, changing character of the industry, the problems in connection with land ownership and control, the available credit facilities, and other pertinent problems, is difficult to find and is often very sketchy in content.

One problem which has particularly puzzled the writer concerns the disposal of the public lands during the period 1880-1890 in the Yakima Valley. The Northern Pacific Railroad had a land grant which extended throughout the main body of the valley, and any person or corporation could purchase as much of such land as the railroad company would sell. Within the grant, however, the government retained every other section as a part of the public domain. At that time no person could legally obtain possession of more than one hundred sixty acres of government land under both the Pre-emption and Homestead laws, nor more than a full section under the provisions of the Desert Land Law. There is abundant evidence, however, that corporations secured control of great quantities of land in the Yakima Valley. The Moxee Company, for example, secured between 6,000 and 7,000 acres, and the larger irrigation companies were reported to have had control of as much as 1,000,000 acres. It is possible that such huge tracts were bought entirely from the railroad company, but it does not seem logical that a company would construct irrigation works through a given area and sell its lands to settlers at forty dollars an acre or more, if every other section could be obtained by the homesteader free of charge. A study of the records of the land office which was established at North Yakima during that period would probably do much toward finding a solution to the problem. The writer has had access neither to those records nor to those of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, nor to those of Yakima County.

The best source from which to obtain the general story of agricultural development has been the newspapers. For that purpose there has been available an incomplete file of the Yakima Record and the Kittitas (Ellensburg) Standard for the years 1880-1884, and a complete file of the Yakima Herald from the year 1889. The latter furnished a great deal of detailed information about the progress which was made around North Yakima

and discussed at least the general progress which took place throughout the remainder of the valley.

The Census Reports and various other government documents have furnished information which has been valuable in tracing the various divisions of the industry, although the writer has had occasion to doubt the accuracy of the figures in many instances. He has noted wide discrepancies between the census reports and reports from the governors of the state and from such official agencies as the state Bureau of Statistics, Agriculture and Immigration. Probably the differences resulted from poor methods of collecting information rather than from any attempt to falsify the facts.

Both the United States Statutes at Large and the Session Laws Of the State of Washington have been invaluable aids in helping to understand the attitude of the federal government and of the state toward the problems of agriculture in arid regions, and to determine the legal basis upon which many of the activities (particularly those relating to irrigation) were pursued.

Of the agricultural journals which have been published only a few have been available, but it is doubtful that others would contribute much of great significance because agriculture was just getting itself established in the Yakima Valley between 1880 and 1900. It is unlikely, therefore, that much information about Yakima agriculture was published in those journals except the more unusual developments which also found their way into other publications.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. Merrill Jensen and Dr. Harold W. Bradley for their encouragement, their criticism, and their help in the preparation of this thesis; to the members of the library staff of the University of Washington for their assistance in the gathering of materials; to Mr. Robertson and Mr. Remy of the Republic Publishing Company for the

courtesy which they extended in permitting the use of the files of the Yakima Herald; and to my wife whose constant encouragement has done much toward bringing this work to its conclusion.

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A HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN THE YAKIMA VALLEY

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CHAPTER I

THE YAKIMA VALLEY

The expression, Yakima Valley as it is used in this discussion will include all of the lands drained by the Yakims River and its important tributaries except the region which lies near the sources of the river and which is known as the Kittitas Valley. The area included by such a definition embraces a number of valleys of varying size and extent, but they comprise a geographic unit, and their problems and characteristics are all about the same. More than a million acres of fertile land are included in the region, but unless it is provided with water by means of irrigation it will produce only sage brush and bunch grass.

The Yakima River rises in the Cascade Mountains near the Snoqualmie and Stampede passes, and flows in a southeasterly direction, emptying into the Columbia River a few miles above the present town of Pasco, Washington. Not many miles below the source of this stream lies the Kittitas Valley which is about thirty miles in length and averages about twenty miles in width. A few miles below the city of Ellensburg this valley becomes a relatively narrow gorge through which the river flows for about thirty miles when it again enters a broadening valley which extends nearly one hundred miles toward the southeast until it reaches the Columbia River. This is the Yakima Valley. It averages about twenty miles in width and is the center of a network of smaller valleys which enter it from east and west.

The Selah Valley which lies just a few miles north of the city of Yakima was at one time a broad meadow land and it is watered by the Yakima River. Toward the northwest rises the Naches River which tumbles down through the Naches Pass, then flows through a fertile valley to empty into the Yakima River a few miles north of the city by that name. Northeast of the Naches River and flowing almost parallel to it is the Wenas Creek. The valley through which it flows is known by the same name. On the south side of the Naches River and emptying into it are the Tieton River and the Cowiche Creek whose valleys run up to the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. During the early days of settlement they were noted for their abundant grasslands. South of the city of Yakima the Ahtanum Creek enters the Yakima Valley from the west. This creek formed the northern boundary of the Yakima Indian Reservation while the Yakima River formed its eastern boundary which extended almost as far south as the present town of Mabton. Within the reservation lay the Simcoe and Toppenish Valleys which received their names from creeks that flowed through them to empty into the Yakima River. Just east of the city of Yakima lies the Moxee Valley. It was important for being in the line of an easy grade from Yakima to the Columbia River, and it was there that the famous Moxee farm was established by a group of eastern capitalists.

It is generally believed that most of the Yakima Valley was formerly a vast lake basin. The soil possesses all of the characteristics of a lacustrine deposit which varies in depth from six to fifty feet. It is sufficiently porous to absorb water readily and it is easily worked. This quality also makes it possible to drain it with little difficulty. An examination of the soil shows that it is especially rich in lime, potash, and phosphoric acid, the three constituents which are most essential to plant life. Where the land is irrigated its fertility is further increased by the minerals from the water which is used. Thus the native richness of the soil itself and the fertilizing properties of the water serve to postpone for a long time the necessity

for fertilizers.¹

With the exception of a deficiency in rainfall the climate of the entire region is quite ideal for agricultural purposes. The summers are warm and the winters are not usually severe, and the variation in the length of growing season made possible by the differences in altitude makes it possible to produce a variety of crops.

To a person who may have become accustomed to the bonanza wheat ranches of Montana and Wyoming, or even the farms of a quarter or half-section in Iowa, the pattern of agriculture in the Yakima Valley is interesting. One is impressed with the small holdings of the individual farmer. The various ranch houses and their outbuildings are situated so close together that the whole valley seems more like an extensive village than a farming area. Another striking feature is the diversity of crops which one can see — a patch of asparagus, a hop yard, field after field of alfalfa, small pastures dotting the landscape, an orchard, a berry patch, a melon patch, a field of sugar beets, or a field of small grain. These present an interesting landscape view which at times appears as a huge checkerboard, and again as a patchwork quilt made of varying shades of green.

It is the purpose of this discussion to show how the present development came into existence. In 1880 cattle by the thousands roamed through the hills and valleys of the Yakima, feeding upon the bunch grass from the sage lands and drinking from the streams. The farmer with his plow had not yet taken possession of the land. By 1900 the present day pattern of agriculture had been well established. Irrigation ditches flowed from the various streams to water the parched lands. Numerous experiments with

¹ J. H. Price (comp.), First Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics, Agriculture, and Immigration on the Agricultural, Industrial, and Commercial Conditions of the State up to and including January 1, 1896 (Olympia, 1896), 12; 25-26

various agricultural products had been tried. Small farms were rapidly becoming the rule. Orchards were producing carloads of fruit for distant markets. Dairying was recognized as a valuable industry. Although subsequent changes and developments have been important, it is evident that the last two decades of the nineteenth century were the formative period for the agriculture of the Yakima Valley.

CHAPTER II

THE CATTLE ERA

The first period of agricultural development in the Yakima Valley was a cattle era which began long before white men inhabited the valley. Although the "boom" days of this period were drawing to a close by 1880, the cattle industry remained of sufficient importance during the next two decades to deserve consideration. In order to understand its full significance it is necessary to outline briefly the history of the industry from its beginning.

According to the narrative of A. J. Splawn who was one of the early settlers in the valley, it was Chief Kamiakin of the Yakima Indians who brought the first cattle into the Yakima country about 1840, having exchanged horses for them at Ft. Vancouver. Other Indians followed his example and it was not long until cattle became quite numerous in that region.¹ Apparently the Indians were not interested in raising cattle for commercial purposes, however, so it is probably safe to say that cattle raising as an industry of primary importance did not begin until the white man brought his herds into the valley.

Meanwhile settlers had begun to enter the Columbia Valley and quickly saw the possibilities of the range. As early as 1860 John Jeffries passed through the Yakima Valley with a herd of beef cattle bound for the Fraser River mines in British Columbia and for a number of years thereafter the various mines of that region furnished the chief market for the cattle of eastern Washington.² The Yakima Valley quickly became important in this

1 Andrew Jackson Splawn, Kamiakin, the Last Hero of the Yakimas (Portland, 1917), 281-282.

2 Ibid., 284-85; In various chapters in this book Mr. Splawn has related a number of interesting episodes of cattle drives to the various mines of British Columbia, Idaho, and Montana

business because it afforded an easy route of travel toward the north and at the same time it furnished plenty of grass and water for the cattle. The grass of the meadows also furnished a good supply of feed for wintering livestock, and after 1861 it was regularly used for that purpose. About the same time a few settlers began to move into the valley with the intention of making it their permanent home. In February, 1861, F. M. Thorp settled with his family at the lower end of the Moxee Valley. In 1862 William Parker and John Allen brought cattle to the Parker bottom, toward the lower end of the same valley, and settled there. These early settlers were all interested in cattle raising. Others followed, and before long it was common to see thousands of cattle roaming the valleys and the adjoining hillsides of the Yakima country.³

About 1865 the mines of Idaho and Montana provided new markets for beef, and the cattlemen became speculators in these markets. The annual drive would start from Yakima in the spring and if the destination were the Montana mines it would last for several months. During the course of the drive it was not uncommon for the value of each animal to increase from forty dollars at Yakima to from seventy-five to one hundred fifty dollars at the mines. The danger of loss was great however; some perished in their attempts to cross the streams; some were appropriated by savages and cattle rustlers; and others were sometimes left behind with sore feet because the drive was too long. The markets at the mines were not always active and on numerous occasions men wintered their stock nearby and waited for another spring before making their sales. Shortly before 1870 the cattlement of the Yakima Valley were forced to look elsewhere for markets since the regions around the mines were producing their own cattle in quantities which were sufficient to meet the demand. The value of cattle around Yakima declined greatly.

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³ Ibid., 282-85

Cattlemen had become speculative and had overstocked the range with the result that the Kittitas Valley became a gathering place for thousands of cattle during the spring and summer months.⁴ In 1870 a new market afforded some relief to the cattlemen. The attention of the residents of the Puget Sound country had been drawn to the larger and fatter cattle that were produced in eastern Washington, and in that year Joseph Borst of the firm Booth, Foss & Borst, butchers of Seattle, came over the Cascade Mountains by way of the Snoqualmie Pass, bought a herd of beef cattle, and drove them to market in Seattle. This trade continued to increase with the growth of population in Western Washington. The demand was not great enough to do much toward improving prices, however, and for a number of years beef animals of good quality could be purchased for around twenty dollars a head.⁵

About 1875 a few buyers from Wyoming bought stock from the cattlemen of the Yakima Valley and drove them over the old Oregon emigrant trail to the ranges of Wyoming. This was apparently a profitable enterprise for the practice continued for at least the next five years.⁶ In 1880 there were at least two droves which were moved from the Yakima Valley in this way. Willis Thorp left about the first of April with about 2,000 head, and J. B. Huntington left a few weeks later with about 3,500 head. The cattle were sold to Messrs. Ryand and Lang, cattle dealers who supplied eastern markets. The firm contracted with Thorp and Huntington for the number of cattle which were needed, and those men purchased from the individual stockmen the number which were required to fulfill their contracts. During March of the same year it was reported that M. Becker sold 200 head of cattle in fair condition to the Smith brothers of the Kittitas Valley for prices which ranged all the way from six dollars per head for yearlings to twenty-two dollars per head for four year old steers.⁷ Evidently the removal of cattle

4

Ibid., 285

5

Ibid., Interstate Publishing Company, An Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima and Kittitas Counties (n.p., 1904), 161.

6

Splawn, Kamiakin, 286

7

Yakima Record, March 13, 20, 27; May 1, 22, June 19, 1880.

to Wyoming did little to help restore prices in Yakima County to their former level.

The general character and conditions of the cattle industry in 1880 are revealed in a letter "from a practical cattle producer in response to pointed inquiries from the census office."⁸ He stated that due to the methods which were used it was not profitable to have less than 1,000 head, unless a dairy was established in connection with the other parts of the business. The method which he described was the common method of raising stock at that time. The herds were allowed to range over the hills and valleys during the summer, fall, and winter months. In the spring the cattle in the various parts of the range were "rounded up" and corralled at points near favored feeding grounds. Here the calves were branded and sales were made.⁹ The reason that such a system was unprofitable unless one engaged in it on a rather large scale is readily seen. It was wasteful in more ways than one. At the time of branding many calves were of course missed, and after they were weaned they became known as "slick-ears" or "mavericks." They were then the property of the first person who placed a brand on them. The person who could afford to begin with a capital investment of only a small herd stood great chances of losing many of them, for they would soon scatter far and wide among the larger herds of many different owners. The system also resulted in quickly over-stocking the range, for although the cattlemen knew about how many acres of range land were required to keep a steer during an entire season, it was impossible to know how much they were exceeding the limits when so many of them used the same ranges.

8 This is the only identification which is given the ranchman. His letter is found in: United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on the Productions of Agriculture as Returned at the Tenth Census, June 1, 1880 (Washington, 1883), 1090-91

9 Ibid.

The only cost which this "practical cattle producer" assessed against the industry was a labor cost of about \$4,700 annually. This included the hiring of five regular men for the full year and about ten extra men for the "round up" and occasionally for feeding the stock during the winter. His investment represented the following items: 5,000 head of cattle at \$50,000; 300 acres of land at \$5,000; \$1,200 invested in buildings and fences; and about \$3,100 invested in horses for working with the cattle and in mares and a stallion for the breeding of horses which were used in the business. He also had at his disposal about 5,000 square miles of government land for grazing purposes.¹⁰ These figures surely indicate that it was essential to be comparatively wealthy in order to be in the cattle business at all, but the writer further stated that men had been known to clear thirty-three per cent profit in five years although there were other times when heavy losses were suffered.

In 1880 the cattlemen were faced with conditions and problems which were a threat to the security of the industry. The census office of the United States reported in 1880 that the section of Washington comprising Yakima and Klickitat counties had available pasturage of about 3,000,000 acres, but that it was well eaten out in Yakima County. Stock had formerly wandered between the Yakima and the Columbia rivers during the summer months and returned to the bottom lands of the Topewash and Setas rivers during the winter. By 1880, however, they had begun to change their habits and wandered over the high plateaus in the eastern portion of the county during the summer and in early winter moved back into the Klickitat country.

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Ibid. It is questionable whether the figures used in this paragraph represented this rancher's actual investment in the industry. For example, of his 300 acres of land it is quite likely that he had homesteaded 160 acres, and had purchased the remainder at \$1.25 per acre. The sum of \$5,000 which he gave at his investment in land would therefore represent his valuation of what the land was worth rather than his actual investment in it.

The instance is similar in the case of his cattle. He had approximately 5,000 head. For cattle of all ages the average price at that time was about ten dollars per head. That would have made the value of his herd about \$50,000, but that does not mean that he had invested that sum in cattle originally.

This reversion of habit was attributed to the fact that the Yakima River ranges were exhausted. That this condition was probably true can also be determined by a mathematical process. It was estimated that thirty acres of range land were required to keep a steer for a year. If there were about 3,000,000 acres of land available it should have been sufficient to accommodate about 100,000 head of cattle. During the winter of 1880-81 it was estimated that there were fully 150,000 head in the Yakima Valley alone. This may have been an exaggeration, but it was probably not excessive for it was reported that the firm of Snipes and Allen had between twenty and thirty thousand head at that time while J. B. Huntington had about ten thousand head.¹¹

Besides the low prices which prevailed, and the overstocking of the range which resulted in an inferior product, homesteaders were beginning to encroach upon the range and to take possession of the lands which were suitable for the production of wheat. Their numbers in 1880 were small, but once the fertility of the soil was discovered and the possibilities of irrigation realized, they were bound to increase. The sheepmen had also appeared by that time and the cattlemen looked upon them as a pestilence. The ranchman (referred to above) complained in his report to the census office that his range was poorly watered to begin with and at the time had a band of "scabby sheep at every watering place."¹² The conditions were were probably exaggerated by this writer as the cattlemen were notoriously prejudiced regarding that particular issue. They commonly complained that the ranges were permanently injured by the sheep which they said killed the grass and poisoned the water. The sheep industry did continue to grow, however, as can be shown by the census reports, and in time became more important than the cattle industry had been. This development will receive

¹¹ Ibid., 1089; Interstate Publishing Company, Illustrated History, 174; Splawn, Kamialcin, 286

¹² Appendix I, Table ix; Census Office, Report On Agriculture, 1880, p1090

more attention in another part of this discussion. It is sufficient at this time to point out that there were probably about one fourth as many sheep as cattle in Yakima County in 1880, but a decade later there were about three times as many.¹³

In addition to the various problems with which the cattlemen were faced, their industry received a severe shock in the form of an extremely cold winter in 1880-81. The losses which were occasioned at that time were so heavy that the industry never regained its former importance. It was estimated that fully eighty per cent of the cattle perished, while the death rate among horses was as high as ten to twenty per cent. The methods used in the cattle industry did not make provision for severe winters. Cattle were expected to forage for themselves and it was impossible to lend them much assistance if they were unable to do so. The amount of hay that could be cut in the valley would never have been sufficient to feed the number of cattle which were in the Yakima Valley during a winter such as that one. Furthermore, had there been plenty of hay available it would have been impossible to have hauled it to the cattle or to have driven them to it.¹⁴ Wesley Jones who stated that his own loss during that season aggregated twenty thousand dollars, has written a description which will bear repeating:

In the Yakima Valley . . . snow commenced falling just before Christmas, and it continued to fall until the entire country had a blanket eighteen inches thick. Then came a chinook. After it had melted part of the snow and caused the rest to pack closely, it ceased and the temperature fell rapidly, resulting in the formation of a hard crust. About Christmas there came another snow storm, which increased the depth of the hoary covering to three feet. Another chinook succeeded, then another freeze; then came another large snow fall,

¹³ Appendix I, Table 1. There are rather wide discrepancies between the official figures of the census office and the local reports, particularly in 1880 and 1890. The author is not so much concerned, however, with exact ratios as with the relative importance of one industry to another, and there is plenty of evidence to support the statement that the sheep industry was much less important than the cattle industry in 1880, but more important in 1890.

¹⁴ Census Office, Report on Agriculture, 1880, p.1089; Splawn, Kamiakin, 319.

another chinook and more cold weather. The result was that the succulent bunch grass was placed beyond the reach of the cattle by three hard crusts, the top one being in places strong enough to bear up the weight of a horse.

By pawing through the successive crusts wherever they were soft enough, many horses succeeded in getting sufficient grass to preserve their lives, but the cattle, not being gifted with as much intelligence and energy, lay down on the frozen snow and perished in large numbers. The cold was intense at times, the mercury falling to thirty-two degrees below zero.¹⁵

An equally dramatic description of the conditions which existed that winter may be found in the writings of A. J. Aplawn. He stated that although most of the men continued in the business with the remnants of their herds, a few disposed of the cattle they had left and gradually drifted out of the country.

The price of cattle declined to almost nothing. Those who could not stand the shock were anxious to sell what they had left, but few were anxious to buy, and of course the cattle were in no condition to be offered upon the market for beef. The Yakima Record reports an instance of two hundred head which were offered for sale for fifteen hundred dollars but no buyers were interested. On the other hand men who still had credit and the energy to rebuild their fortunes profited by the misfortunes of the others. Realizing the opportunity which was offered by the very low prices which prevailed, Ben Snipes, for example, went to Portland and negotiated with W. S. Ladd, an important banker of that city, for ample credit to buy what remained of the herds of those who would be quitting the business. Since a severe winter with plenty of snow in the Yakima country is always followed by an abundant growth of grass, he soon had his herds in excellent condition and was in a position to take advantage later of the rising market which

¹⁵ This is quoted in: "Interstate Publishing Company, Illustrated History, 173.

resulted from the decrease in the number of cattle available.¹⁶

The significant thing about these various conditions which affected the industry adversely was that a change was introduced into the character of the industry itself. The cattlemen saw the folly of overstocking the range and realized that they could not depend upon weather conditions as always being favorable to the industry as it was operated. For example, A. J. Splawn said that when he saw the awful havoc which had been wrought by that terrible winter, he resolved then and there to own no more cattle than he could properly care for.¹⁷ Besides, there was the constant pressure from the farmers and the sheepmen who were persistently and successfully encroaching upon what had formerly been the free range. Gradually the raising of cattle became an industry which was complementary to farming. The number of cattle owners increased but the size of the individual herds in most cases decreased. More provisions was made for the care of the stock during the winter months even though the range which was not under cultivation was still used for summer grazing. The relative importance of the industry showed a steady decline. In 1880 the beef cattle of Yakima County comprised between ten and fifteen percent of the total in the state.¹⁸ In 1890 this percentage had decreased to about six per cent, and by 1900 it had dropped to a little less than five per cent. The Cattle Era had gone and a diversified livestock industry had taken its place side by side with a general agricultural development.¹⁹

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Ibid., 174; J. Orin Oliphant, "Winter Losses of Cattle in the Oregon Country, 1847-1890," in the Washington Historical Quarterly, 32: 14-15 (Jan., 1932); Splawn, Kamialkin, 319; Yakima Record, Jan. 22, 1881, May 27, 1882.

17 Splawn, Kamialkin, 319

18 This percentage is an estimate based upon the fact that in 1880 Yakima County (which at that time also included Kittitas County) had a little more than twenty per cent of the cattle in the State. At least half of those were in that portion which remained with Yakima County after the division was made in 1883.

19 Miles C. Moore, "Report of the Governor of Washington Territory," 1889, in the Report of the Secretary of the Interior (51 Congress, 1 Session, House Executive Document No. 1, serial 2726, Washington, 1890), 531.